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OUR NEW ATHENIANS

MAX J. HERZBERG
Central High School, Newark, New Jersey

For all the Athenians and strangers which were there, spent their time in nothing but either to tell or to hear some new thing.—Acts 17:21.

May a wee voice of protest be lifted against some of the sentiments so vigorously expressed by Dr. Louis W. Rapeer in his paper on "The Outside of the Cup"?¹ With a number of Dr. Rapeer's assertions no teacher in tune both with the times and with the infinite will fail to agree. Increasing emphasis must be laid by the English teacher as by every other teacher on the social factor in teaching if he would continue to live in the educational system of tomorrow. More careful adjustment to the particular aims and needs of the definite boy and girl is likewise necessary. Few of us, furthermore, would quarrel with Dr. Rapeer as to the seven aims of education—its attention to health, vocations, domestic economy, citizenship, morality, right use of leisure, and social service.

It is, however, in an extreme application of the significant doctrines he enunciates that Dr. Rapeer, it would seem, lays himself open to legitimate opposition. One gathers from Dr. Rapeer's statements the impression that practically nowhere else but in contemporaneous literature can legitimate material be found that, in his opinion, will satisfy his seven aims of education. "The literature selected," he says, in outlining the English course of the future, "will probably be largely modern literature." Such works as *Comus*, the *Sir Roger de Coverley Papers*, and the *Essay on Lord Clive* will be displaced. Literary history will not be taught. Bruere's articles in *Harper's Magazine* will be found more educationally influential than Burke's *Speech on Conciliation*. Newspapers and magazines will apparently occupy people's leisure exclusively, and if not the *Atlantic Monthly*, then the *Argosy* will do. Altogether, an educational world is to evolve in which the zealous teacher will discover his highest possible ideal in Pococurantism.

¹ *English Journal*, V (June, 1916), 379-91.

The present writer is no foe to the contemporary note in English teaching. He has pointed out in an earlier article in the *English Journal*¹ that it is both judicious and valuable to mingle many books of the present day with the ordinary classics assigned for outside reading, and that great danger lurks in recommending to pupils for their private reading books that are anemic or solely of antiquarian interest. The high value of many recent productions and of many contemporary periodicals may readily be admitted. Jack London, for example, undoubtedly is a figure of literary importance, and there is no reason why students need wait a century before their teachers recommend to them *The Call of the Wild* or *The Game*. So, too, that excellent magazine *Adventure* is most wholesome reading, and may easily be used to win adolescent boys away from lurid periodicals of inferior character.

But it need not follow (and here is the issue) that all the writing of past centuries or decades is *per se* without significance and without appeal, whereas almost anything published within a year or two is both valuable and interesting. For one doubts, to take specific instances, whether the type of mind that today likes to read *Snappy Stories* will necessarily balk at the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, or that the tales of W. W. Jacobs, good as they are, are intrinsically more attractive than those of Captain Marryat. Let us read both Jacobs and Marryat. Unfortunately it is true that a certain form of academic hypocrisy has in the past often insisted that pupils read (or pretend to read) books which the teacher himself has never read, and which he would regard it as a punishment to read. But the fact that, to the average student, Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* is dull and Burke's *Speech on Conciliation* indifferent need not mean that we discuss in our English classes nothing but Harold Bell Wright or the latest issue of the "Pluck and Luck" series.

The whole problem hangs, I am inclined to believe, on a proper conception of the course of English and American literature. A study of that literature from the historical viewpoint (a study which Dr. Rapeer, as has been noted, would be especially reluctant to include in the curriculum which he proposes) may be made to serve many ends. In the first place, it may become a convenient

¹ "Supplementary Reading for High-School Pupils," *English Journal*, IV (June, 1915), 373-82.

summary of the important political and social history of the English and the American peoples. That history is, to a large extent, the history of liberty and of democracy, and it is a little hard to see how an undeveloped boy or girl (or a mature adult, for that matter) can properly assimilate present-day ideals of service without such a background. History is generalized experience. Deliberately to forego a knowledge of history is an act almost on a plane with that of an individual who might try to force himself to forget everything that he had learned or done except what had occurred within the preceding twelve months. The history of the literatures composed in English inevitably acquaints the student with such landmarks in man's progress as Magna Charta, the age of discovery, the great Rebellion, the humanitarian movements of the last century and a half, the American Revolution, the evolution of responsible government. The student may at the same time gain an intimate knowledge of the personality and goal of great democratic thinkers like Langland, Sir Thomas More, Burke, Shelley, Ruskin, William Morris, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Walt Whitman. What better example for Americans zealous for the well-being of their republic than the earnest, splendid career of John Milton, of whom Mitford says that "his first desire was the freedom, and through that the happiness, of his country"; and of whom Peter Bayne records that "his soul's fellowship was with the great Republicans of Greece and Rome, and with the Psalmist and Isaiah and Oliver Cromwell." It is none too well known that Milton stands in the direct line of those who contributed ideas and phrases to the Declaration of Independence.

Any great literature, moreover, is a repository of ideas. The progress of English and American poetry and essay writing, the development of the drama and the novel, these may be made to contribute in an important way to the expansion of the student's mind. In literature he may see the growth of manners from the rude courage and loyalty of *Beowulf* to the sophistication of Thackeray or the delicacy of Hawthorne. He may observe the fundamental conceptions of feudalism, understand the humanistic ideals of the Renaissance, sympathize with the deepening of sentiment in the eighteenth century, and later be drawn to nature and to humanity with Wordsworth and Bryant, Carlyle and Emerson.

That lack of wide interests so prevalent among American youth today is likely to be dispelled, partially at least, by an acquaintance with the great works and great authors that mark the course of English and American literature.

Literature, finally, and literary biography help to develop distinctness of personality. Our modern civilization forces us into a single mold. We are too much alike, too much inclined, each of us, to be merely *vox populi*. Literature brings forth streaks, sprouts, sports, differences—*otherness*, if it may so be called. The lives of literary men are revealed with a fulness almost impossible elsewhere, since in their cases we have a triple fountain of facts: the usual information that gathers about eminent men, the zeal of fellow-craftsmen to honor the memory of a colleague, and the material to be gathered from their own works. As a consequence, we obtain a rich and fructifying revelation of personality—the shy shepherd Caedmon, rotund and jolly Chaucer, the fine gentleman Sir Philip Sidney, the burly figures of rare Ben Jonson and of his namesake sage Sam Johnson, the misanthrope Swift, the “wise fools” Goldsmith and Boswell, quaint De Quincey and impractical Coleridge, God’s nobleman Sir Walter Scott, dramatic Byron, gentle Lamb and gentle Longfellow, the seer of nature Burroughs, the much-experienced traveler Kipling, and a hundred others.

It may be that some of our literary histories have not aimed definitely enough at this revelation of personalities and ideas, but have unwisely confined themselves to a chronological catch-all. The remedy for poorly taught literary history is, however, not in an ejection of all literary history from our courses of study, but in a wiser conception. Let our literary historians choose for treatment only those authors who are of intrinsic and substantial interest, leaving others to university students. Let them focus their attention on the live man or woman, on his personal traits and his ideas. Let them relate names and works to the larger current of the times, and let them bring forth clearly the basic notions of our American democracy and civilization as they are revealed in the past. Literary history might then become a key to unlock part of the past of men and make it a treasure for the present—even for those who like best that which is hot from the presses.